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DEPT FOR WHA/CCA AND AF/S

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [CU](#) [SF](#)
SUBJECT: (C) SOUTH AFRICA UNLIKELY TO PUSH FOR DEMOCRATIC
TRANSITION IN CUBA

REF: A. STATE 127513
[1](#)B. 05 PRETORIA 1935

Classified By: Ambassador Eric M. Bost, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The ANC-led South African Government remains intensely loyal to the Castro regime and is unlikely to support calls for a democratic transition in Cuba, according to DFA Director Pieter Swanepoel (strictly protect). The tone and tenor of the South African-Cuban relationship will remain warm regardless of the leadership in Havana. President Mbeki sent a get well note to President Fidel Castro, which conveyed his support for the handover to Raul so that Fidel would have the "necessary space for a full recovery." END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) D/PolCouns and PolOff delivered Ref A demarche on August 10 to Ambassador Pieter Swanepoel, Department of Foreign Affairs Director for Mexico, Central America, the Andean Community & the Caribbean. Swanepoel, former South African Ambassador to Mexico, noted that South Africa and Cuba have "very cordial" relations, based in large part on the historical support the Castro regime provided the African National Congress (ANC) during the anti-apartheid struggle.

SAG Unlikely to Comment on Cuba's Internal Politics

[1](#)3. (C) While South Africa "appreciates and respects" the U.S. position on promoting democracy in Cuba, Swanepoel frankly admitted that South Africa will never comment publicly on Cuba's internal political transition. Even in private meetings, South African senior officials do not criticize Cuba or raise difficult issues (even when the two governments disagree). Their bilateral meetings are "relaxed" and focus on "common denominators", with both sides consciously avoiding contentious issues. To give a flavor for the tone of the meetings, Swanepoel recounted how the two FMs discussed at length at their January 2006 Joint Bilateral Commission meeting in Hermanus how South Africa might lobby other African states to support Cuba on U.N. Human Rights Commission votes.

[1](#)4. (C) In Swanepoel's opinion, relations between South Africa and Cuba will remain strong ("business as usual") even if President Fidel Castro hands over power to his brother or someone else. Because of the close historical nature of the relationship, the tone and tenor of the dialogue between the

two countries will not change. President Mandela felt strongly that the ANC should not criticize those who supported the liberation movement during the anti-apartheid struggle, and that sentiment continues to hold sway in the ANC and SAG.

Mbeki Message of Support

15. (C) South Africa is following President Castro's health closely, according to Swanepoel. The FM has requested regular updates on the situation, which Swanepoel is responsible for compiling, however the SAG Mission in Havana is severely shortstaffed and is able to provide only minimal information. President Mbeki sent two unpublicized personal notes to President Castro recently, a birthday wish and a get well message. Swanepoel read from the text of the get well note, in which Mbeki "saluted his cadre" President Castro, conveyed his support for the decision to hand power to Raul Castro so that that Fidel would have the "necessary space for a full recovery," and expressed his "solidarity" with the Cuban people.

Bilateral Contacts Continue; NAM Planning

16. (C) Swanepoel observed that the flow of official visitors between South Africa and Cuba continues despite Castro's illness, with the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly scheduled to travel to Havana shortly, and includes large numbers of provincial and local government officials. The two governments are currently discussing the idea of Cuba

sending technical experts to South Africa to assist with public works projects (even if opposition leaders in the South Africa question the value of such assistance). Swanepoel also noted that the medical exchange program (Ref B) is winding down, with a smaller number of Cuban doctors coming to South Africa on shortened contracts (three years vice five). The previous program, proved an embarrassment since many of the doctors did not return to Cuba at the end of their service. (Note: under South African law, foreigners who reside in South Africa for five years have the right to apply for permanent residence. End Note.)

17. (C) The Cubans are working very hard to make the upcoming NAM Summit in Havana a success, Swanepoel said. They appear to be devoting enormous energy to the Summit and will try to "revitalize" the organization, which has been relatively ineffectual in Swanepoel's opinion. President Mbeki and FM Dlamini-Zuma will attend the Havana Summit, no matter who leads Cuba in September.

Comment

18. (C) Only twelve years after the end of apartheid, the ANC-led South African Government remains intensely loyal to President Castro and the Cuban leadership, who backed and funded them during the anti-apartheid struggle. Swanepoel is a reliable Embassy interlocutor and has attended virtually every senior-level bilateral meeting with Cuba the SAG has held over the past four years. We trust his assessment that South Africa is unlikely to actively support calls for democracy in Cuba or to comment on Cuba's internal political situation either in public or in private discussions with Cuban officials.

19. (C) That said, the ANC and the South African Government are deeply committed to global democracy promotion and will find it uncomfortable to support a transition in Cuba which flies in the face of their democratic ideals and rhetoric. We will continue to stress the Ref A theme of support for a transition led by the Cuban people in which they determine their future through free and fair elections in our

conversations with SAG officials at all levels. We encourage Washington to do the same in communications with South African interlocutors.
Bost